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SANTA CATALINA ISLAND

CATALINA ARCHAEOLOGY: AN INTRODUCTION

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Islands, because of their generally limited areas and sharp separation from other land regions, form ideal units for regional archaeological studies. The potential for such research on Catalina has remained unrealized, for in spite of intensive survey efforts almost no site reports are available, and the data base for regional analysis has been entirely inadequate for anything but very general statements. Publication of this volume marks an important step forward since it includes excavation data on five Catalina sites—more solid excavation reporting than has appeared in any previous study. It therefore lays a cornerstone for integrative studies of the future.

My experience with Catalina archaeology began in the early 1950's and it may be of interest to review the situation as it was at that time. A number of people had a long-standing interest in Catalina's Indian history and I was able to confer with several of them. Judge Windle, the local justice of the peace, had written a popular account of Catalina history which devoted considerable space to Indians and archaeology; these comments were necessarily somewhat speculative in the absence of any controlled archaeological data. The judge apparently got a considerable amount of his information about archaeology from Ralph Glidden, whose interest in archaeology was largely commercial and based on selling artifacts and operating a small local museum as a tourist attraction. When I came to Catalina, the Glidden museum was closed to the public and had been for some years, reportedly because of some dispute Glidden had had with the city over business licenses. However, the museum itself was intact and I was able to visit it on several occasions. This was not an enjoyable experience for an archaeologist—on the one hand there were many beautiful and unusual artifacts from Catalina and other islands to attract interest. But unfortunately the documentation was virtually nil, nothing was catalogued, grave lots and human bones had been irretrievably mixed together, and the collection was a classic example of acquiring objects while destroying all the contextual data. To top it all, Glidden had been much taken with pictures of monkish catacombs in Europe, and he had imitated them by nailing human bones to the walls and rafters in various fanciful patterns, using sets of femurs, pelvises, and other bones mixed together from many Indian graves. He also had a small glass case which contained thousands of human teeth extracted from all the skulls and combined into one "display". The general effect was calculated to cause a big response from the tourists; its effect on the archaeologist was almost enough to cause an immediate coronary.

Glidden's collection later came into the hands of the Catalina Island Museum, and at the time of this transaction Keith Johnson, then museum technician at UCLA, worked to get together what catalog and site data could be obtained. There are many important artifacts in the collection and much of it is still worth analysis and publication.

My other early contacts on Catalina were more constructive, and the Santa Catalina Island Company was most helpful through Malcolm Renton, then a vice-president of the company. Fred Reiss, another Island Company employee, was my field collaborator, and through his knowledge and love of the island we were able to initiate formal survey and recording of archaeological sites, and later to undertake excavations at Little Harbor.

The first C-14 date for Catalina came from the Little Harbor excavations (run by the Michigan laboratory since there were no C-14 facilities in California at that time, or at least none to which I had access. I managed to talk Jimmy Griffin into putting one of my samples through the mill). I really had no idea how old the Little Harbor site was, and there was no basis at that time for making a firm age estimate. I made a blind guess that the site was not very old and was surprised at the 3880-year date which seemed pretty early at that time. Griffin's comment was that all California archaeologists tended to underestimate the age of their sites!

So in the past 25 years or so, we have gone from a period when there was no formal archaeology for Catalina, no survey and no site reports, to the point where the survey is largely complete, where some excavation has been done in a number of sites, and where the chronology is roughly blocked out (although still far from precise and secure as the present articles demonstrate).

The value of substantive site reports has been underestimated in recent years, and even actively challenged by some archaeologists of "theoretical" persuasions. We need to remind ourselves that all archaeological conclusions are based on archaeological sites and the things they contain, and that in the absence of site data such as that reported here, all of our conclusions and hypotheses remain mere speculation. Archaeological conclusions are no more valid than the site data that provide the evidence. Indeed, as theoretical sophistication has grown and more meaningful questions have been asked of archaeological data, the site reports become more important than ever.

It is also true that as archaeologists have become more sophisticated, the standards and demands of archaeological reporting have risen, so that it takes a lot longer now to do a site report than it used to. Many hours are needed to define and describe even a very small site excavation; the writing job is often frustrating, tedious, and boring to the author who is trying to make sense out of a tremendous range of data, and present his findings in an effective way. Anyone who has ever completed even a small site report cannot fail to appreciate the patience and scholarly effort invested by the authors of the accompanying reports.

It is a standard conclusion that "more work is needed". Only a small fraction of the sites on Catalina have seen scholarly excavations, and of those most of the samples dug range from small to minuscule. Further, not all the time periods in what is at least a 5000-year continuum of human history are documented in the reported archaeology, leaving big blanks in the historical record. Fortunately, Catalina is one of the few large land areas in Southern California where an enlightened management program has supported archaeo-

logical research for many years, and where imminent destruction of the remaining sites is not threatened, thanks to the Catalina Island Conservancy. The rapidly-declining possibilities for excavation programs on the mainland enhance the importance of Catalina for many kinds of archaeological analysis in the future.

In the course of preparing this introduction, I happened to see a letter written by Paul Schumacher, a pioneer collector of the last century whose collections are shared by the Smithsonian and the Peabody Museum of Harvard. The letter, dated May 14, 1876, is interesting because of Schumacher's passing comments on the archaeology of Catalina. He says, "My visit to Catalina Island was too short and otherwise not provided for . . . to be a success", (although he did acquire one skull which was duly boxed up and sent East). He continues, ". . . but by exploring this island properly, I have no doubt, judging by what I observed, the difference in the inhabitants of the islands will be traceable which, by all the information I gained, extends likely to San Clemente. I proposed to Professor Baird a trip to Santa Catalina and San Clemente, both islands are yet to be explored, which may be very remunerative, and the expenses are so trifling with the facilities on hand which latter are at Professor's command. The present season is the best to visit these places."

Schumacher refers here to his opinion (based on his artifact collections), that there were significant differences between the archaeology of the northern and southern islands, and he saw this as a worthwhile problem to investigate. Today, more than a century later, it must be conceded that our opinion on this comparative study is still pretty impressionistic, and that it still remains to be ascertained what the differences are between the northern and southern islands. Only detailed site reports will allow for the appropriate comparative studies to be made, but as such reports appear it would certainly be a useful task for someone to identify and define the cultural boundaries separating the islands from each other and from mainland archaeology.

A number of other significant areas of study need to be amplified before general statements on southern California archaeology can be confidently put forward. I list these briefly below in the hopes that they will inspire investigation of some of these questions:

1. Both absolute and relative chronology for Catalina are just being worked out. Certainly Catalina has older sites than have been reported; where are they? Santa Rosa Island has been put forward as having an abundance of Early Man sites, some of Pleistocene age. None of the other islands have so far produced such claims—why not?
2. The steatite trade from Catalina was one of the major events of southern California culture history. The age, extent, and meaning of this trade have been blocked out in preliminary reports but a comprehensive analysis of these matters would certainly be of great benefit and considerable theoretical implications for the economics of hunters-and-gatherers.
3. Midden analyses and ecological studies in general are of key importance in recognizing the variability of hunter-gatherer sites in both time and space.

Such studies on Catalina for the Little Harbor site have already been used in theoretical arguments about possible overexploitation of favored resources in the past. Because of its relatively limited land resources, the Island's middens offer a better-than-usual control over the archaeological evidence of man's adaptation to his environment, which in this area was heavily oriented to coastal and ocean resources.

The taking of column samples and then sorting and identifying all the components is one of the less-interesting activities of archaeology, and it is doubly frustrating to spend hundreds of hours compiling a table and then see no grand plan or meaning in the results. Yet each of these studies takes on an immediate value when it is compared with similar studies from other sites, and the compilation of such data is an essential task.

The authors of the reports presented here have all done their bit toward addressing some or all of the concerns listed. A continuation of this active field investigation will enable some significant progress in scientific archaeology, not only for Catalina itself, but for southern California archaeology in general, and ultimately for our understanding of the hunter-gatherer stage of human culture.